



# Celebrity Series of Boston

Wednesday, April 25, 2018 at 8pm  
Symphony Hall

**Los Angeles Philharmonic**  
**Gustavo Dudamel** conductor

## Notes on the program

**Esa-Pekka Salonen** (b. 1958)  
**Pollux** (2018; East Coast premiere)

*Since stepping down as music director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, a position he held from 1992 to 2009, Esa-Pekka Salonen has amplified his activity and visibility as a composer. The violin concerto that he composed for the Los Angeles Philharmonic in 2009 received one of music's highest honors, the Grawemeyer Award, and for the past three seasons he has served as Composer-in-Residence for the New York Philharmonic. The Los Angeles Philharmonic commissioned Salonen's newest work, Pollux, heard here for the first time on the East Coast. The composer provided the following note:*

During the composition process of *Pollux*, I encountered a strange problem: My material seemed to want to grow in two completely opposite directions. Finally I realized that these very different musical identities (I had referred to them as brothers in my sketches) would not fit into one cohesive formal unit, a single piece. They simply couldn't coexist.

This made me think of the myth of the non-identical twins Castor and Pollux who share half of their DNA, but have some extreme phenotype differences, and experience dramatically different fates.

In the Greco-Roman mythology, Pollux was immortal, as he was fathered by Zeus. Castor was mortal as he was sired by Tyndareus, the king of Sparta, although his status changed post-mortem. The mother of both was Leda, who while being already pregnant by her husband had a tryst with Zeus, who seduced her in the form of a swan. (There's something intriguing in the idea of this famed beauty having a penchant for large water birds.)

My solution was to write two independent but genetically linked orchestral works. *Pollux*, slow and quite dark in expression, is the first of them. *Castor*, extroverted and mostly fast, will follow later.

*Pollux* has a ritualistic character, based on a mantra rhythm I heard some months ago during dinner in a restaurant in the 11th arrondissement in Paris. A post-grunge band played on the background track, and I wrote down the bass line on a paper napkin not knowing exactly what it was and who the musicians were. I couldn't get it out of my head, and decided to use a heavily modified version of it in *Pollux*. The pattern has been distilled to pure rhythm, and slowed down to less than quarter-speed of the original.

Another source of material is a chorale (here wordless) based on the first lines of Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus* (*Die Sonette an Orpheus*):

Da stieg ein Baum. O reine Übersteigung!  
O Orpheus singt! O hoher Baum im Ohr.

(There rose a tree. O pure transcendence!  
O Orpheus sings! O tall tree in the ear!)

I was very taken by the funny and surreal, Salvador Dali-like image of a tree growing out of the ear. The metaphor is far from obvious, but it is clear that Orpheus can unify art and nature by the sheer force of his song. Every musician I know would like to be able to do that.

*Pollux* oscillates between cloudlike formations (that's where demigods dwell) and more clearly defined textures of the Orpheus music. After the final, *fortissimo* incarnation of the chorale, a nostalgic English horn solo brings Pollux home. At the very end there's an Aeolian echo (a scale used in Ancient Greece), a simple chord consisting of natural harmonics in the strings. I was trying to imagine something much older than most music.

-Esa-Pekka Salonen

### **Edgard Varèse (1883-1965)**

#### ***Amériques* (1921)**

Edgard Varèse was an innovative composer whose small body of music—only twelve complete works—shaped the future of music on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. He studied in his native Paris until 1907, and then he relocated to Berlin for six years, where he came into contact with Strauss and Schoenberg. After a brief return to Paris, he moved on to New York in 1915 and based himself there for his remaining 50 years.

*Amériques*, the first score that Varèse completed after moving to New York, paid tribute to the sound world of his adopted home. Leopold Stokowski introduced the first version with the Philadelphia Orchestra in 1926, after which Varèse revised it for a slightly more manageable but still enormous ensemble.

The gentle opening music for alto flute—belonging to the same tradition as the flute solo from Debussy's *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*, or the bassoon melody that begins Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*—offers no hint of the chaos to come. That alto flute theme recurs as a fixed point of reference as the scene around it grows increasingly manic. Some of the most fascinating music comes from the expanded percussion section, including such unconventional instruments as crow calls, boat whistles, sirens, and the "lion's roar," which involves a string that passes through a drum head to create a menacing rumble. A generation after Dvořák filled his idealized "New World" Symphony with quasi-spirituals and themes modeled on Native American songs, Varèse offered a different perspective on the land of opportunity, using every possible resource of the symphony orchestra (the ultimate "Old World" mode of expression) to render a gritty, unpredictable and sometimes terrifying picture of urban street life.

### **Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975)**

#### ***Symphony No. 5 in D minor, Opus 47* (1937)**

On January 26, 1936, Joseph Stalin walked out of Shostakovich's opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* during the third act. Two days later, the newspaper *Pravda* published a scathing review titled "Muddle instead of Music." The critic decried, "Here we have 'leftist' confusion instead of natural human music. The power of good music to infect the masses has been sacrificed to a petty-bourgeois, 'formalist' attempt to create originality through cheap clowning. It is a game of clever ingenuity that may end very badly."

At a time when Stalin's enemies were disappearing by the millions, the warning that Shostakovich's embrace of modernism "may end very badly" was no idle threat. He was understandably cautious with his next works, withdrawing his Fourth Symphony before the planned debut in 1936 and shelving his only other major work of the year, Four Romances on Poems by Pushkin, until 1940.

Shostakovich began his Fifth Symphony in April of 1937, and he completed the scoring that fall. No established conductor would take on the score, so the task of preparing the debut fell to Yevgeny Mravinsky, a young conductor who had recently joined the Leningrad Philharmonic.

The debut of the Fifth Symphony on November 21, 1937, was a watershed moment in Shostakovich's career, capped by curtain calls that night lasting some thirty minutes, until the stunned composer was escorted out of the hall. It was a remarkable redemption for Shostakovich, coming less than two years after his official rebuke.

“Rebirth” was in fact central to Shostakovich’s plan for the Fifth Symphony. In the finale, he quoted a song by that name, one of his recent Pushkin settings. Pushkin’s text begins: “An artist-barbarian with his lazy brush / Blackens the painting of a genius.” In the poem, the work of the “genius” endures while the damage inflicted by the “artist-barbarian” sloughs away.

The symphony strikes an ominous tone from the beginning. In the first four measures, the strings introduce three gestures of central importance to the rest of the movement: a leaping figure with a snapping, dotted rhythm; a sequence of descending, sigh-like fragments; and a closing motif of three repeated notes. With this material laid out, the violins intone a quiet, nervous melody over an accompaniment built from the leaping motive. Music of a contrasting character arrives with a recurring figure that repeats a long-short-short rhythm, itself a variant of the earlier “sighing” motive. At first this marching music is sweet and docile, but later the same rhythmic pattern supports a frightful journey to a harrowing climax.

The scherzo comes next, and at first the heavy bass line promises more of the first movement’s intensity, but ultimately a juxtaposition of bombastic and silly music creates a carnival-like atmosphere.

The *Largo* third movement echoes the opening of the symphony, beginning with strings alone, subdivided here into eight sections to create a rich, layered sound. Offsetting the somber gravity of the strings, passages featuring solo woodwinds and flecks of harp and celesta cut through like beams of light.

The finale is a brutish march that again toes the line between sincerity and parody. On one level it appears to be a model example of “Socialist Realism,” glorifying Soviet might in an accessible language that the proletariat could relate to; and yet at the same time, a more cynical spectator might sense mockery and sarcasm of that same heavy-handed ideal.

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